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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: THE ISLAMIST -  
GOVERNMENT SHOWDOWNS IN IRBID, KARAK, AND MADABA

REF: A. AMMAN 2985

[B.](#) AMMAN 3126

[C.](#) AMMAN 1703

[D.](#) AMMAN 1936

[E.](#) TD-314/47435-07

[F.](#) TD-314/46874-07

[G.](#) 06 AMMAN 5945

[H.](#) AMMAN 1410

[I.](#) AMMAN 528

[J.](#) AMMAN 1031

[K.](#) AMMAN 2255

[L.](#) AMMAN 2301

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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) Municipal election campaigning is in full swing across Jordan with an explosion of posters, rallies, and spontaneous political salons throughout the country. (The political environment in Amman itself, by contrast, remains subdued, given that the mayor and half the municipal council are appointed, not elected.) In these contests, tribal consensus-building mixes with modern political machinery and the vagaries of local personalities and power brokers. As noted ref A, the municipal elections are widely seen as a bellwether for upcoming parliamentary elections, and as such the results will be worth their weight in propaganda gold for whichever side can spin the fastest.

2. (SBU) In researching this cable, poloffs met with candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, and political observers across the country. This cable expands on the description of upcoming municipal elections in ref A, and highlights the electoral battles being waged between and among the tribes and Islamists in Irbid, Karak and Madaba. The political dynamics of Zarqa (a hotbed of Islamist activity) are reported ref B.

IAF Strategy: Conquer the Divided

3. (SBU) True to form, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, has approached the July 31 municipal elections in a calculated and coordinated manner. The IAF - the government's arch-nemesis and the only political party of any magnitude - has sought to energize its base and rattle the GOJ by aggressively preparing for elections, while periodically hinting that it might boycott (reportedly on the grounds of unfair electoral laws, ref A).

4. (SBU) Yet the trend line towards IAF participation has been clear. In June, the party declared its intention to run

candidates for mayor in five of the most important Jordanian cities -- Irbid, Zarqa, Ruseifeh, Madaba and Karak. On July 23 it announced it would also seek mayoralties in three smaller municipalities in the Governorate of Irbid. In Amman, where the mayor and half the council will remain appointed, the IAF will run for at least half of the elected seats; observers say the Front wants to send the message that it can compete. (In 1999, the IAF ran 100 candidates for mayoralties or municipal council seats across the country; 90 were elected. The IAF won the mayoralty in Irbid, took 5 of 20 elected seats in the Amman municipal council, and gained control of the councils in Zarqa and Ruseifeh.)

¶5. (SBU) The IAF is unlikely to receive a majority of votes in any of the races it contests; as noted ref A, the "one man-one vote" system in place has the effect of encouraging voting by tribal or familial affiliation. Instead, IAF strategy hinges on expectations that tribal and pro-government candidates will divide the non-Islamist vote and give the IAF candidates pluralities. Thus the central IAF leadership has hand-picked a single, well-qualified, reputable candidate to compete in each of the five targeted municipalities. Ziad Shawabkeh in Madaba, for example (see para 7 below), represents an ideal IAF candidate: he brings management skills, has East Bank tribal bona fides (with a tribal support network), and can mobilize IAF voters and Jordanians of Palestinian origin who tend to be responsive to the Front's strongly anti-Israel, anti-normalization line.

¶6. (SBU) On top of its thoughtful electoral strategy, the IAF has strong tactical capability, employing a cadre of passionate organizers who are broken into teams that register voters and will manage the get-out-the-vote efforts on election-day. IAF opponents also accuse the front of using its charitable arm, the Islamic Charity Society, to "buy votes" indirectly from its beneficiaries through its social services. Some go so far as to smear the IAF with using

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connections with powerful Islamists in Saudi Arabia to obtain Hajj visas outside the national quota which it disperses to individuals in exchange for their and their family members' votes.

#### Tribal Politics

¶7. (SBU) In contrast to the IAF's machinery, tribal-based politics stumbles along, producing a handful of competing candidates in each race, each supported by his/her tribal/family base and a loose coalition of other families and interests. Most Jordanians would give priority to a family or tribe member if one is running; platform or IAF affiliation is a secondary concern. (Note: As described ref A, the GOJ has interpreted the election law, even for councils with multiple seats, as allowing voters to name only a single individual on their ballot. The IAF objected strenuously to this interpretation, of course, precisely because they were expecting voters to vote family first, then IAF. End note.) This does not mean, however, that tribe size is the determining factor. Major tribes in a region often seek to share power, ensuring that the mayoralty and parliamentary seats are held by different groups. In some cases, multi-term deals are struck to rotate overall tribal support between candidates of two or more traditionally dominant families. Further complicating the scene, local power brokers may encourage various tribal candidates to run whether or not they are viable candidates, hoping to draw votes away from their rivals. Even just a few weeks before the election, there are likely to be several intending candidates in any given municipal race. Families and community leaders meet and gradually reach a consensus to determine who stays in.

Irbid - Boss Tweed Would Be Proud

¶8. (SBU) In Jordan's second largest city, Irbid, the battle between Islamists and tribal candidates takes on an urban hue as well. Tribal allegiances are still paramount, but even the largest families are dwarfed by the 165,000 registered voters. Estimates of participation vary greatly. An International Republican Institute poll of registered voters in June predicted 70 percent participation, while some local political observers anticipate participation will fall short of 50 percent, requiring Irbid to re-open polls for a second day (ref A). Opponents of the IAF believe the Front's political machine can mobilize 20-25,000 voters. Given the size of the electorate and questions about turnout, estimates vary of the number of votes needed to capture the mayoralty.

¶9. (SBU) The IAF is very well organized in Irbid and its candidate is the man to beat, despite a number of faults and a newly-expanded electoral map that includes outlying suburbs of Irbid where the IAF is weaker. The Front's candidate Nabil Kofahi (an East Banker) was elected mayor in 1999, and earned a reputation as a clean, tough leader. However, he also became known for a focus on collecting taxes - sometimes in disregard of the impact on poorer citizens. His popularity suffered as a result, and he lost a race for parliament in 2003 (while two other IAF candidates were elected from his district). Kofahi's weakness was underscored when his rival for the party candidacy, Mamdouh Smadi, won the reportedly-contentious mayoral straw-poll held by the local IAF branch (ref C). Many believe Smadi could have defeated any and all comers in the election itself, but the central IAF leadership overruled the branch office, for reasons that remain obscure to Post.

¶10. (C) However, independent candidates could well benefit from high turnout - if they can triumph in the pre-election tribal politicking. Two independents are vying to be Irbid's alternative to the IAF: Abdulrauf Al Tal and Abdunnasser Bani Hani. A third popular candidate, until his withdrawal from the race, was respected former mayor Waleed Al Masri, appointed by the GOJ in 2003. Until mid-July, Masri was considered the front runner in a crowded field of tribal-based candidates that would split their votes and ultimately yield an IAF victory. Informed observers report that Masri was convinced to withdraw from the race by powerful Irbid politician Abdulrauf Al Rawabdeh (a current MP and former Prime Minister) in exchange for a "better position." Rawabdeh appears to have thrown his support behind Al Tal, who some speculate will be more malleable to Rawabdeh's business interests. However, even Bani Hani's campaign manager admitted that any independent who wins in Irbid will be beholden to Rawabdeh.

¶11. (C) Al Tal represents one of the original seven families

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of Irbid, a formidable group of city fathers that other residents sometimes describe with contempt and suspicion. Al Tal is seen as a moderate Islamist with a strong following among voters in the Irbid Palestinian camp, and the IAF's perceived pro-Hamas leanings could potentially hurt it here. Some observers have reported a strong reaction by Palestinians in Irbid against Hamas' June takeover in Gaza and argue that, with most Jordanians of Palestinian origin leaning toward Fatah in the internecine Palestinian struggle, they will consequently support Al Tal over Kofahi.

¶12. (C) The second major tribal candidate, Bani Hani, is relying on suburban voters to augment his family base. He comes from the same area as Kofahi, is expected to draw some votes away from him there, and to pick up tribal votes from the Ababneh family, whose candidate recently withdrew. Bani Hani's campaign manager, who managed successful parliamentary campaigns for Bani Hani candidates in the past, described the political gamesmanship in Irbid. To get around tight government requirements for voters registering from IAF

areas, intermediaries convinced Al Tal that they represented 4000 Palestinian votes ready to support him. Al Tal's campaign facilitated the registration process, using allegedly looser requirements for tribal candidates. Soon thereafter the group announced in the local press that it would in fact support the IAF. Bani Hani's campaign manager claimed that representatives of 500 voters from the Turkman neighborhood (an IAF stronghold) of Irbid approached him in a similar fashion, claiming to support Bani Hani. He suspected duplicity, taking their documents and registering them in a remote district so on election day they would be unable to vote, and the IAF would squander resources trying to get them to the polls. He also planned a whisper campaign against Al Tal's campaign manager, who he said was a convicted drug dealer, hoping this would depress support for Al Tal on the day of the election. He also planned to post photos of IAF candidate Kofahi with a Mercedes he reportedly won in a lottery, in violation of Shari'a law, in an effort to undermine his Islamist credentials among swing voters.

#### Madaba - IAF vs. Christian King-makers

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¶13. (SBU) Three candidates lead the field in the race for mayor of Madaba, the capital of the Madaba governorate with a population of 60,000, 25 miles southwest of Amman.

Historically a town with a large Christian population, Madaba attracts tourists to visit Byzantine-era mosaics in downtown churches and nearby Mount Nebo, the site where Moses is traditionally considered to have beheld the Promised Land for the first time. In the 1980s the Madaba Palestinian refugee camp was absorbed into the municipality, forever changing its Christian identity; after 100 years of Christian mayors, Muslims have held the post since 1987. Today, of the 47,000 registered voters in Madaba, only roughly 6000 are Christian.

Observers expect 60-65 per cent turnout on election day, and believe that 10,000 to 12,000 votes will be needed to capture the mayoralty.

¶14. (C) The IAF candidate in Madaba, Ziad Shawabkeh, is the front-runner. Hailing from a powerful East Bank family, Shawabkeh is trained as an engineer and has a reputation as a serious, clean politician with a strong connection to the public. He is considered a moderate within the IAF, aligned with the "old guard" leadership. Observers count 8000 votes as his base - 4000 from his family and home turf, 3000 Palestinian votes from IAF sympathizers in the camp, and 1000 scattered IAF votes among other demographics. Shawabkeh is seeking to strengthen his Palestinian voter base by encouraging a highly-respected camp resident, Hajj Abed al-Darabeneh, to run for a council seat. If Darabeneh runs, and especially if he agrees to co-campaign with Shawabkeh, the IAF could tap even deeper into its natural constituency.

¶15. (C) Two independent tribal candidates, Aref Ruwajeh and Abdul Mahdi Ma'aya, are the likeliest pro-government alternatives. Each controls a much smaller base than Shawabkeh but is working to cobble together a coalition of tribal and anti-IAF support. However, each has threatened to throw his support to Shawabkeh if regional power brokers support the other.

¶16. (C) Ruwajeh brings 4000 votes (scattered among several families) from the eastern parts of Madaba. A former finance manager for the municipality, he is seen as vulnerable due to allegations of corruption. In addition, members of his family held the position of mayor twice before, a fact that the Ma'ayas point out in arguing that they should have their turn. For his part, Ma'aya's family controls a mere 1200 votes but boasts a strong connection with the Christian

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community and its well-organized 6000 ballots (the broader Ma'aya family includes large numbers of both Muslims and Christians).

¶17. (SBU) The Ma'aya family is part of the much larger, but fractious, Azaideh tribe, from which two lesser candidates, Mohammad Fshaikat and Khaled Shakhatreh, are also running. Observers expect Fshaikat to withdraw - possibly with encouragement from the government - to shift votes to a stronger anti-IAF candidate. Shakhatreh's intentions remain unclear. If he stays in the race it will further split the Azaideh vote to the advantage of the IAF and to a lesser extent Ruwajeh. Ma'aya supporters want both Azaideh candidates to withdraw so Ma'aya can pad his base with their Azaideh votes.

¶18. (C) In addition to the center-court competition between Shawabkeh, Ruwajeh and Ma'aya, two other factors deserve mention in Madaba. Madaba Christians have been testing the waters to run a Christian candidate for mayor, who would enter the race with the 6000 Christian votes. Local Christian power brokers told poloffs that they had the support of key figures close to the central government, including former Prime Minister Faisal al Fayez, and claimed some Muslim candidates are prepared to ally with them in order to stop the IAF. However, they will not launch their campaign without a green light from the government - which is to say, the General Intelligence Directorate (GID). Such a go-ahead does not appear to be forthcoming. A well-placed observer and supporter of Shawabkeh told poloff a Christian candidate could not win because moderate Muslims would align against said candidate, even if that meant supporting the IAF. "Christians can be king-makers in Madaba," he said, "but not the king."

¶19. (C) Also illustrative of tribal politics is the matter of Hamed Al Zen, from the Palestinian Seba'weh tribe, who is among the minor candidates in the Madaba mayor's race. According to a close associate, another member of the Seba'weh tribe, Member of Parliament Suleiman Abu Ghaith, has actively sought to undermine the campaign of his kinsman. Abu Ghaith is preparing for a tough re-election race later this year and would be hampered if another Seba'weh was elected mayor, because local tribal dynamics would not permit a Seba'weh in both the mayor's seat and Parliament. Abu Ghaith is reportedly working behind the scenes to provide inside information on tribal and family dynamics to the GID.

#### Karak - Tribal Politics, Concentrated

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¶20. (C) In Karak, a city of about 20,000 people and the capital of the Karak governorate 80 miles south of Amman, three candidates lead a field of six aspiring mayors. Karak is tiny compared to the larger municipalities of Irbid and Zarqa (ref B), and tribal politics reigns supreme. There are 33,000 registered voters in Karak municipality, and observers expect 60-65 per cent participation - higher than in some past parliamentary elections. According to Karak's former mayor Mohammad Al Ma'aiteh, the winner will need 6000-7000 votes, depending on the number of candidates on election day.

Two weeks before the election, he told poloffs it was still too early to predict the winner. Again, the IAF boasts the strongest candidate, Abdulhakim Al Ma'aiteh, a relative of the former mayor, who teaches math at a high school in Amman and is considered serious and corruption-free. Another member of the East Bank Ma'aiteh family, Sattam Al Ma'aiteh, is also running. While not beloved by residents of Karak, and unlikely to win, the former mayor said Sattam could skim family votes away from Abdulhakim.

¶21. (C) The strongest alternative to the IAF is Ahmed Al Dmour, a civil engineer at the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, member of the Jordanian Ba'ath Party (but running as an independent), and one of two members of the Al Dmour family intending to run. The other, Khaled Al Dmour, is potentially a stronger candidate both within and outside the family, according to former mayor Al Ma'aiteh. Yet tribal politics may well undermine both Al Dmours' candidacies. Notables in the family met in mid-July in an attempt to build consensus behind one Al Dmour, but the effort was fruitless, weakening



the prospects for either of the candidates, with a third of the family behind each of the two and a third undecided.

¶22. (C) The third candidate in this tightly packed race is Tala Majali. While not among the largest families in Karak, the Majalis are one of the most powerful clans in Jordan, and voters may bank on the close relations with the government and access to ministries, parliament and the business community that a Majali-as-mayor would bring. Former mayor

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Ma'aiteh suggested that wealthy and well-connected Majali family members might well buy votes, speculating that Majali was the only candidate likely to use this tactic in Karak. The former mayor told poloffs that buying votes would not determine the race, but money combined with power and access could influence the electorate.

¶23. (C) Ma'aiteh noted that the central government had facilitated voter registration for supporters of non-IAF candidates, but had to tread lightly to avoid the public perception that it was interfering. In 1995, he said, the Ministry of Interior directly intervened against the IAF. Christian and moderate Muslim voters reacted by coalescing behind the IAF candidate, who won.

Comment: Traditional and Modern Politicking at Full Boil

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¶24. (C) Irbid, Madaba, and Karak are illustrative of the broad trends in Jordanian politics: traditional tribal politicking blended with IAF populism and a dash of modern campaigning (and mudslinging), with the precise formula calculated at a local level. The IAF's anti-Israel and anti-U.S. rhetoric make for popular platform planks, but the final results will derive as much from the dizzying array of candidates, shifting alliances, and localized skills or gaffes. Meanwhile, the GOJ is often involved in behind-the-scenes efforts to manage the competition in favor of nationalist candidates. With the IAF and the government both seeking to use these elections to shape the public mood for parliamentary polling the fall, the races are heating up.

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Hale